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ABSTRACT

Journal writing is an expressive form of writing that teachers in all curricula can use to help their students increase writing fluency, facilitate learning, and promote cognitive growth. It combines the positive aspects of diaries and class notebooks, focusing on academic subjects from a personal point of view. Teachers can assign journal entries not only as homework, but also to begin or end classes, at the start of lectures, or to interrupt/refocus class discussions. Used in these ways, journal writing acts as a learning catalyst and as a clarifying activity, directing student attention toward a particular subject while providing writing practice and a permanent record to which the student can refer when preparing for a test or writing a more formal composition. Although teachers do not have to read student journals or comment about their content, positive comments and suggestions about student journals can serve to improve effective use of the journals. Teachers can even keep their own journals--not only as an example for their students to follow, but also as a means of constant self-evaluation. (RL)

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JOURNAL WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

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JOURNAL WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Why Journals?

> When I write a paper I make it personal. I put myself into it and I write well. It bothers me when people tell me to make it more impersonal--to take me out of it, I'm afraid I can't write unless I am in the paper somehow. (Jody S.)

Writing, conceived in the broadest sense, is an interdisciplinary learning tool with a place in every academic classroom; it is no more the province of the English teacher than numbers, the math teacher, or speaking, the speech teacher. Teachers in all disciplines need to find strategies to incorporate writing, regularly and provacatively, in their classrooms. The student journal is one solution. This paper argues that assigning journals in any course of academic study increases writing fluency, facilitates learning and promotes cognitive growth.

Recent research by James Britton and his colleagues at the University of London suggests that the writing taught in schools today is narrowly conceived. In looking at 2,000 pieces of writing from 65 secondary schools Britton's researchers were able to describe the writing according to the function it served. Most writing samples could be placed in one of three general categories: 1) transactional, 2) poetic or 3) expressive.[1]

Transactional writing gets things done; it informs, instructs, persuades and carries on business. Most writing required in schools is transactional: term papers, lab reports, essay tests and book reviews. Poetic writing is art; how something is said becomes as important as what is said. Teachers often call this kind of writing "creative" and limit it to poetry, fiction and drama. Expressive writing reveals the thinking process; it is often unstructured and close to informal speech; diaries, journals, personal letters and the first drafts are examples. Teachers seldom ask for expressive writing, especially in the higher grades, as this form accounted for less than four percent of senior high school writing in Britton's study.

Britton believes that teachers who ignore expressive writing make it more difficult for students to both "learn to write" and "learn to learn." Expressive writing is the matrix from which other forms of writing take shape. Expressive writing helps writers find out what they want to say; it is often the first stage of writing intended, eventually, to be either transactional or poetic. Expressive writing, then, is a part of the entire writing process which involves conception, exploration, incubation, revision and finally, completed draft. Students who become aware of this process, who learn to use expressive writing as a bridge to more formal writing, usually become more accomplished writers.

Writing in general, and expressive writing in particular, is also a unique mode of learning.[2] Thinking on paper. Thus, expressive writing is a potent learning tool for the student who has learned to use it. Students can use it to solve problems and brainstorm in search of new ideas. Britton argues that expressive writing "may be at any stage the kind of writing best adapted to exploration and discovery. It is the language that

externalizes our first stages in tackling a problem or coming to grips with an experience.[3]

However, English teachers as well as teachers in other disciplines often look suspiciously at expressive writing. For some it is too personal, unstructured or informal to assign in the classroom; for others it is too difficult to measure; and for still others expressive writing is viewed as a leftover from the excessively liberal learning practices of the 1960's. Carefully used, student journals may allay teachers uneasiness about using expressive writing in their classrooms, for the journal can be both a formally required, rigorous assignment and, at the same time, a place for students to indulge in free, informal speculative writing.

Starting a Journal

> My roommate says I write too much, but I think I write too little. There were so many times I was really depressed or fired up and I never wrote about it. I wanted to experiment more. Now as I look back, I should have tried to write poems or something.
> (Jim S.)

Journals might be looked at as a continuum including diaries and class notebooks: whereas diaries are records of personal thought and experience, class notebooks are records of impersonal fact and other people's ideas. The journal is somewhere between the two. Like the diary, the journal is written in the first person about ideas important to the writer; like the class notebook, the

journal may focus on academic subjects the writer would like to learn more about.

Diary	Journal	Class Notebook
(Private expression)		(Objective topics)

Journals may be focused narrowly, on the subject matter of one discipline, or broadly, on the whole range of a person's experience. In any case, students should be cautioned to limit the scope of each entry to a single subject. In this respect the journal differs from the diary, which is often a record of daily trivia while each journal entry is a deliberate exercise in expansion. "How accurately can I describe or explain this idea? How far can I take it?" The journal allows students to deliberately expand, through language, their awareness of what is happening to them, both personally and academically.

Writers in any discipline should experiment with their journals. It is important not only to write often and regularly on a wide variety of topics, but to take some risks with form, style and voice.[4] Experiment with the time of day: writing in the early morning is quite different from writing late at night; writing at the same time every day, regardless of mood, may produce surprising results. Dorothy Lambert relaxes students by suggesting that "a journal is a place to fail. That is, a place to try, experiment, test one's wings. For the moment, judgment, criticism, evaluation are suspended; what matters is the attempt, not the success of the attempt."[5] She asks students to pay attention to writing as a process and quit worrying about product perfection--in this case, spelling, grammar, punctuation, form, diction, and style. For better or worse, the journal is the student's own voice; the student must know this and the teacher respect it. Peter Elbow urges students to engage in the process of discovery through "free writing," a technique that encourages the writers to free associate while writing as fast as they can. Elbow writes: "You don't have to think hard or prepare or be in the mood: without stopping, just write whatever words come out--whether or not you are thinking or in the mood."[6] This process illustrates immediately,

for most writers, the close relationship between writing and thinking. The journal is a natural place to freewrite. Students can practice it on their own to get their mental gears moving toward a paper topic; teachers can assign freewrites to brainstorm new research projects. Keeping these exercises in journals guarantees a written record of the ideas generated, which may prove useful during the term of study or, later, to document intellectual growth.

The significance of journals as written records of thought cannot be underestimated at universities which value independent thinking. The journal is the student's record of individual travel through the academic world; if the student writes frequently and seriously it will serve well when formal papers or projects need to be written. Ken Macrorie calls journals the seedbeds from which other, more public kinds of writing will emerge: "After keeping a journal for a week, stop for a week and then go back to its pages. Choose the entry which most moves you, and work it up or cut it down until you have produced a small piece of writing whole and satisfying to you."[7]

The technique of using ideas recorded in the journal as the stuff from which larger, more finished productions emerge, works for any academic study. Field notes jotted in a botany notebook and sifted through the intellect can become an extended observation written in a "botany journal"; this entry, in turn, might well become the basis for a major project. Personal responses by history students, in their journals, after reading the court transcripts from the Salem Witch Trials may increase their understanding of that distant and confusing event prior to writing a term paper on the subject. Sociology students, after collecting data about welfare mothers, might use their journals for a role-playing exercise to help them better understand the mothers' situation. Consciousness of their subjects' point of view will allow the students more careful control when they write their final report. In like manner, the journal can become the place of first articulation for any idea or experiment.

Journal Writing Activities

Journal writing can become a central activity in any academic classroom; teacher and students may use journals actively, every day to write in, read from and talk about--in addition to whatever private writing students do on their own. Using the journal in class may substitute for other routine writing assignments, from quizzes to book reports. Journal writing stimulates student discussion, starts small group activity, clarifies hazy issues, solves problems, and reinforces a variety of difficult learning experiences.

Journal writing works because every time a person writes an entry he individualizes his instruction; the act of silent writing, even for five minutes, is conscious, deliberate mental activity. A person can't daydream, doze off, or fidget while writing--unless he writes about it, and even that becomes a conscious choice. Journal writing will not make passive students miraculously active learners; however, it will make it harder for them to remain passive. Try some of the following ideas:

1. Introduce a discussion class with a five-minute journal-write. Any class. Any subject Use the journal to bridge the gap between the student's former activity (sleeping, walking, eating, sitting, listening) and your classroom. Suggest a topic related to the day's lesson, and allow those first few minutes for students to compose (literally) their thoughts. A biology discussion section might begin with the teacher writing pro and con statements on the board about the feasibility of genetic engineering; students are then asked to write for a few minutes in their journals about which position they agree with. A philosophy discussion of "free will" might begin with students writing a free will argument for five minutes in their journals prior to talking about it.

The writing period allows students to collect their thoughts and focus them in a public direction; without that time, the initial discussion might be halting and groping. The teacher may ask if anyone would like to read his or her entry

out loud; at first there will be hesitation, then someone--sometimes the teacher--breaks the silence and reads; others will follow. It is hard to read rapidly-written words in public--but also rewarding and sometimes thrilling when the language has taken you to new areas and someone responds enthusiastically. The teacher may read his entry first to put the students at ease, for some of his sentences are usually awkward, halting and fragmentary just as students' sometimes are. This exercise, repeated periodically, provides, for some students, a structured oral entry into the difficult public arena of the classroom and helps affirm the value of their personal voice.

2. Start a lecture with a short journal-write. Like the discussion class, the lecture also benefits from a provocative transition exercise which starts students thinking toward your lecture. Prior to beginning a lecture, ask students to write for a few minutes on their understanding of something related to the lecture topic. For instance, a journal-writing exercise during the first five minutes of a psychology class may ask students to articulate their preconceptions about "hypnosis" prior to a lecture on that topic. Likewise, a journal-write in a nineteenth-century American or British literature class may ask students to define "romanticism" prior to a talk on the "Romantic Movement" which occurred during the first third of that century.

The professor may then commence lecturing directly, using the brief writing time to set the scene or mood for the lecture; or he may decide to start a short discussion based on the student writing as a lead into the lecture. Either way, the students are more receptive to the material because they have become involved in it.

3. End a class with a journal-write. This exercise asks students to pull together information or ideas they have learned during class. An economics professor might ask students to write about the most important thing they remembered from his Adam Smith lecture or to articulate their understanding of "free trade."

Art, drama or speech classes which witness a "happening" might be asked to write down their reactions during the last five minutes of class, as something to build upon later.

The summary j-write also serves more general ends: "What did you learn in here today--one thing--any thing?" or "What questions are still unanswered?" These issues can be handled orally, or course, without recourse to the journal, but forcing loose thoughts onto paper sometimes generates tighter thinking. And again, the private act of writing in the midst of an otherwise noisy and busy public forum allows the learner to collect thoughts that otherwise might be lost in the push-and-shove hurry to leave class. Too often instructors are caught short by the bell, still trying to make one last point to complete their sense of what the lesson must contain, while at the same time realizing by the rustle in the room that the students were already mentally on their way to lunch. Far better to end class with their own observations and summary, in their journals, and cover a little less lecture territory. That final act of writing/thinking helps students synthesize material for themselves, and so increases its value.

4. Interrupt a class with a journal-write. Plan a five-minute writing pause in the midst of the fifty-minute lecture to ventilate the classroom a bit. Listening is a passive activity, even when writing down lecture notes; even the best listeners drift off into daydreams from time to time. A journal-write not only gives people a chance to daydream on paper, but also to engage themselves actively and personally with the lecture topic. Writing changes the pace of the class; it shifts the learners into a participant role and sometimes forces clarity from confusion simply by demanding that participation. Writing clears out a little space for students to interact with the ideas being thrown at them and allows them to focus problems while the stimulus is still fresh. "Reflect on the idea that Marx is considered a philosopher rather than a scientist by scholars today" or "See if you can explain the phrase 'the medium is the message' in your

own language and make sense out of it." If planned in advance, these pauses can be welcome breaks and fruitful exercises at the same time.

A variation on the planned lecture pause is the spontaneous one, where the lecturer senses that he (or she) is not being understood, or where the lecturer himself is unable to put his finger on the point he wants to make. Try a j-write pause to clarify where you are, or at least where you think you are. The resulting writing may surprise you, for the students may put their finger on the problem and the next fifteen or twenty minutes will be more profitable than had you kept on, getting deeper and deeper into the woods, with no clearing in sight.

5. Interrupt a discussion for a journal-write. Refocus a digressive, rambling, or boring discussion by simply calling "Time out" and asking people to write for a few minutes in their journals: "What are we trying to explain?" or "Restate the argument in your own words; then let's start again." Pauses in a discussion change the class pace and allow quiet, personal reflection. We all need a little time-out in some classes, yet seldom find a way to justify it pedagogically. The journal-write is a good solution. In one-sided discussions where a few students dominate and others can't participate, interrupt with a short j-write and sometimes the situation reverses itself, as the quiet ones find their voices while the loud ones cool off by the forced reflection. Also, the group can become more conscious of the roles people play in class by asking questions like: "What is your part in this discussion?" or "Try to trace how we got from molecules to psychopaths in the last fifteen minutes" or "Why do you think Tom just said what he did?" Writing about talking brings to bear a different part of our mental apparatus, forces us into the "spectator role" and thereby creates thoughts we didn't have before. Sometimes it helps.

6. Use journal-writes to solve problems. In a class on modern literature ask students to write about the lines in an e e cummings poem which they do not understand; the following day many students will have written their way to

understanding by forcing their confusion into sentences. What better way to make sense out of "what if a much of a which of a wind" or "my father moved through dooms of love"? Math or chemistry teachers might ask their students to solve difficult equations by using j-writes when they are confused. In fact, problems exist in every discipline; the journal could become a regular tool to assist in problem solving. In these cases, the act of writing out the problem is, itself, a clarifying activity. Switching from numbers or symbols to words sometimes makes a difference; putting someone elses problem into your own language may make it your problem and so lead you one step further toward solution.

7. Assign journal writing as homework. Suggest that students respond to questions or ideas that were highlighted in the day's class--or which would prepare them better for the next class meeting. A class of computer science students might be asked to prepare a mock dialogue between themselves and a Univac 1110--prior to actually working with the computer the first time the following day. A music teacher might ask her students to keep a written record, for a week, in their journals of their articulated responses to contemporary music; on a given day these responses would form the basis for a discussion of "subjectivity and modern music." Using the journal as the place to record asks the students to go one step beyond vaguely thinking about their responses--but stays short of making a formal written assignment which might cause the student too much worry over form or style.

In some disciplines, like engineering, math or physics, homework questions might be less "open-ended" than ones asked in liberal arts courses, but even in the most specialized fields some free, imaginative speculation helps . . . And when that speculation is recorded in the journal, the student has a record to look at, later, to show where he's been and perhaps suggests where to go next.

8. Ask students to keep a "lab journal" as well as a lab notebook. Or in place of one. Ask them to record their thoughts and feelings about the experiments

they are conducting. This will not only add a personal dimension to keeping records of their work but may also provide a place to make more connections between one observation or the next. Perhaps the journal should be the last separate part of the lab notebook--with dated entries to correlate with laboratory data from a given day. Or perhaps the interleafing of journal entries about the experiments should take place along side the recorded data.

A mechanical engineering student recording data about a "heat-transfer problem" might also include personal observations about the practical application of his experiment. Likewise, a class of geology students on a field trip looking for evidence of glacial morraines, might be asked to speculate freely in their journals about which land features appear glacial and which result from natural erosion. The journal is a good place to record speculation.

The same may be done with a "field notebook" in biology or forestry: add to the objective data each student's own thoughts about that data. The record of observations is supplemented by other, more personal data which might prove useful in writing up a report or suggest the germ for another paper or project. Writing it down both focuses and suggests.

So far we have talked about the journal as a learning catalyst; an equally valuable function focuses student attention specifically on language use. By reading passages out loud, or reproducing passages to share with the class, students become more conscious of how their language affects people. Students in a freshman humanities class suggested that duplicated journal passages should become a part of the "humanistic" content of the course; they mimeographed selected journal entries and shared them with each other for a week, and it worked. Students and teacher learned more about each other and had fun discussing the various forms the writing took. Passing journal-writes around class suggests new writing possibilities to students--the stimulus to experiment comes from classmates rather than teacher and so has the strong validity of peer education.

The journal entry is the stage after "pre-writing", or is itself a kind of pre-writing, and the stage before a first draft. Students who write regularly in their journals seldom have trouble "finding a topic" to write about; they find in their journals, seeds, sprouts and cuttings, from which formal papers easily grow. Students will search journals by themselves easily enough; they should also have the opportunity, in class, to work in small groups, taking turns reading selected passages to each other, looking for ideas to expand. Initially, at least, such groups should be cautioned to respond positively--"Which passage do you like best and why?" or "What strikes you as most interesting?"--in order to encourage the writer as much as possible. Since the journal includes expressive writing of all kinds, from jottings and observations to meditations and tentative paper drafts, many entries will never become anything other than a record of a moment's thought; others will prove more useful.

A student's journal can be a documentary of both personal and academic growth, a record of evolving insight as well as the tool used to gain that insight. In other words, the journal is important as both product and process. It is a snapshot album--or more accurately, a portfolio of 35 mm contact sheets from which only a few negatives will be printed into quality photographs. Each journal keeper rediscovers the value of the written record, so essentially and uniquely a human activity. Whether one finds the journal useful to recover a lost note or fact, or just to wonder, "I thought that?", the documenting of individual thought is one of the essential liberal arts.

Near the end of the term students might prepare their journals for a public reading: students should delete any entries too personal to share, and then index the journal--add page numbers and a table of contents for major entries. Finally, students write a concluding entry in which they evaluate their own journal: "Which entries are your favorites? Which seem least worth doing? What patterns do you find from entry to entry?" For some students this proves to be the

clarifying activity of the term, the action which finally makes the journal make sense. In the words of one student: "For this entire term I was convinced I had no ideas of value in this journal. I repeated this belief in class several times. But now I find it isn't true. I was surprised to find how little I wrote about dorm life and my family and how many times I led with half-fledged ideas."

Teacher Journals

> Class struggling for cohesion; me afraid I can get it back--must tighten up the structure. Have been slack on the journal-writes--was it a mistake not to read them this term? Only Karen has shown me her journal voluntarily. Some students claim it's working, others can't get into it.

Try keeping a journal along with your students. Journals do not work for everyone; the experience of keeping one may be the only way to find out. Teachers, especially, can profit by the regular introspection and self-examination forced by the process of journal writing. The journal allows sequential planning within the context of the course--its pages become a record of what has worked, what hasn't, and suggestions for what might work next time--either next class or next year when the course is reviewed prior to teaching it again. Teachers can use journals to do lesson plans, work out practice exercises, and conduct an on-going class evaluation. The journal may become a teaching workshop, a catalyst to generate new research ideas and a record of intellectual growth.

Teachers should consider doing journal writing in class along with their students. Teachers who write with their students and read entries out loud in class lend credibility to the assignment: it is worth the teacher's time too. Doing the writing also tests the validity of the writing task; if the instructor has a hard time with a given topic it provides an insight into the difficulties students may encounter and so makes for a better assignment next time.

The journal is a means to evaluate each class session after it is over; the journal is not the only way to do this, of course, but it proves a handy place to

keep these records, alongside the planning sessions and the in-class journal-writes. "Why was that discussion on Walt Whitman so flat today? If I had waited longer, instead of answering my own question, others might have spoken and deflected some of the attention away from me." Jottings like this may help teachers understand better the teaching process and sometimes result in dramatic insights about what should or shouldn't have been done. These evaluations also act as prefaces for the next planning session, pointing toward more structure or less. And when a class, for one reason or another, has been a complete failure, writing about it can be therapeutic; one can objectify what went wrong and so create the illusion, at least, of being able to control it the next time.

Reading and Evaluating Student Journals

Reading student journals keeps teachers in touch with student experiences, with student frustrations, anxieties, problems, joys, excitements. Teachers who understand the everyday realities--both mental and physical--of student life may be better teachers because they can tailor assignments and tests more precisely toward student needs. Reading student journals humanizes teachers.

Some teachers insist on not reading student journals, arguing they have no right to pry in these private academic documents. It is a good point. However, there are important reasons why the teacher ought to look at the journals--and precautions which can eliminate prying. First, for students just beginning to keep journals, a reading by a teacher can help them expand their journals and make them more useful. Sometimes first journals have too many short entries; a teacher who notices this can suggest trying full-page exercises to allow the writers more space to practice developing ideas. Second, some students believe that if an academic production is not looked at by teachers it has no worth; while there is more of a problem here than reading journals, the teacher may decide at the outset

that looking at the journals will add needed credibility to the assignment. Third, students feel that journals must "count for something"--as must every requirement in an academic setting. "If teachers don't look at these things how can they count'em?"

One way to count a journal as part of the student's grade is to count pages. Some teachers grade according to the quantity of writing a student does: one hundred pages equals an 'A'; seventy-five a 'B'; fifty a 'C'; etc. Other teachers attempt to grade on the "quality" of insight or evidence of personal growth. Still other teachers prefer a credit/no credit arrangement: to complete the requirements for the course the students must show evidence they have kept a journal. When writing becomes a regular activity the need to "check up" simply disappears. Teachers need only to see the journal pages flipped for evidence of use; they don't need to read the entries. But this method precludes the teacher from learning through the student's writing.

To resolve this apparent paradox between the student's need for a private place to write and the benefit to both student and teacher from at least a limited public reading, students might be asked to keep their journals in a loose-leaf format, and to provide cardboard "dividers" to separate sections of the journal. This way, teachers may look at sections dealing with their course, but not to see more personal sections. And if portions of the student's commentary about a particular class would prove embarrasing, the loose-leaf allows deletion of that entry prior to teacher perusal. A teacher may ask for the pages concerning, for example, "American History" the third week of the term, skim quickly, and hand back--making suggestions only to those students who are not gaining much from the experience; he may check the journals again later in the course and assign a credit/no credit mark.

Teachers who read journals need to be careful about what they write in them. A small, positive comment following the latest entry encourages the writer to

continue: "Good journal. I especially enjoyed your entry on 'freedom of speech'." Date the comments and read from that point next time. Needless to say, negative or critical comments have no place.

Once or twice during a term each student might be asked to duplicate an entry on a ditto master to share with the class. Some prefer to make fresh entries for the assignment; some prefer not to sign their names. No matter. Students share thoughts with each other, notice different writing styles, gain new ideas for subjects to write about in their own journals, and provide the class with material often worth discussing as a whole group. In this way, the journals are experienced by an audience wider than the self or teacher, but only on terms the student chooses.

Well used, journals can be exciting and humane educational tools, capable of leading students into nooks and crannies of learning long-ignored. Journals can be vehicles to combat passive learning and to facilitate personal engagement, regardless of the subject matter. And they can make those of us who assign and use them more aware of ourselves and our teaching. Student journals may be the ultimate interdisciplinary tool to integrate personal and academic knowledge across the curriculum.

NOTES

[1]James Britton, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, Harold Rosen, The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18) (Macmillan Education, London, 1975), pp. 88-105.

[2]See Janet Emig's work, especially The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders (N.C.T.E. English Research Report No. 13, 1971) and "Writing as a Mode of Learning" College Composition and Communication (Spring, 1977, pp. 122-127).

[3]Britton et al., p. 165.

[4]Numerous writers have suggested exercises for using journals in class; see, for example: Daniel N. Fader and Morton H. Shaevitz, Hooked on Books (Berkley Medallion Books, New York, 1966); Harry Rougier and E. Krage Stockum, Getting Started: A Preface to Writing (W. W. Norton, New York, 1970); Michael Paull and Jack Kligerman, Invention: A Course in Prewriting and Composition (Winthrop, Cambridge, Mass., 1973).

[5]"What is a Journal" in Writing to be Read, by Ken McCrorie, second edition (Hayden Book Co., Rochelle Park, N.J., 1976), p. 151.

[6]Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers (Oxford University Press, New York, 1973), p. 9.

[7]Ken McCrorie, Writing to be Read, p. 158.